



# RETURNING HOME?

Preparing for life back home  
after studying abroad



**friends**  
INTERNATIONAL

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“I am delighted to be able to recommend *Returning Home?* to my students. It is an honest, thorough and constructive approach to re-entry issues for international students returning home with the challenges and opportunities that brings.”

**Andrew Bishop, Coordinating Chaplain, University of Surrey**

“This book accurately captures some of the adjustments that are needed on returning home from a period of study and was warmly received by some of my students who have been through the experience. In fact, some of the points in the booklet rang true for my own experience of re-entry from the US over 30 years ago.”

**Hill Gaston, Professor of Rheumatology, University of Cambridge**

“...full of practical information and exercises, and well-laid out to enable students to consider all the issues or find and focus on the particular issues that are concerning them.”

**Catherine Shelley, Anglican Chaplain, University of Birmingham**

“...I strongly recommend this excellent workbook to all international students for a thorough preparation to return to their homeland!”

**Dick den Hertog, Professor of Operations Research, Tilburg University, The Netherlands**

“...comprehensive, realistic and thoroughly honest... *Returning Home?* deserves to be widely used, and will—I am convinced—ease the passage home for any who work through it seriously.”

**Ian Castro, Professor of Fluid Dynamics, University of Southampton**

## CONTENTS

# RETURNING HOME?

<b>1</b> Introduction	5
<b>2</b> Why are you returning home?	7
<b>3</b> The reality of re-entry stress	11
<b>4</b> Your life abroad	13
<b>5</b> Who is going home?	17
<b>6</b> What's waiting at home?	25
<b>7</b> Initial entry	31
<b>8</b> Possible re-entry issues	35
<b>9</b> Closure and farewell	41



**TQs** – Tough Questions – are found at the end of most chapters to help you think things through more practically.

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

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Are you an international student who will soon be returning home? If so, this book is for you!

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When you first came overseas to study, you may have suffered some culture shock as you experienced aspects of life in your host country which were different from life at home. It is well known that entering a new culture and country can be a stressful experience!

But what about going back to your own culture (often called 're-entry') after a time away? Surely *returning home* is by definition the act of slipping back to where you belong and are automatically understood, and to everything that feels familiar and normal. Surely the transition should be easy. In fact, re-entry stress is a very common experience, and the expectation that settling home should be easy can make it all the more distressing. There will be times when returning home won't feel like returning home at all.

You see, the reality is that you have changed during your time abroad. It may be the clothes you wear, the friends you have, your accent or your use of time or it may be deeper changes at the level of attitudes, values and beliefs. You have changed! And life back home will also have changed while you were away; family, friends and work colleagues have had experiences you weren't a part of. They may have certain expectations of you (and you of them). Or they may not know what to expect as you return! Successful re-entry will depend on how well prepared you are to handle these changes and expectations.

**RETURNING HOME?** is a workbook designed to help you think through:

- the realities of ‘reverse culture shock’
- the process of re-entry to your home culture
- the responses you may make to the situations you face on return

## Making the most of this book

**RETURNING HOME?** is not designed to be read from cover to cover in one sitting. It is a workbook that asks lots of questions for you to think about. It is best worked through with others so that you can discuss some of the issues raised – in a small group or perhaps with a friend who is also about to return home or with a local friend. Some parts you may prefer to do on your own. Not all of it will apply to you.

This is a good opportunity to spend some time thinking about your life, the direction you want to take in the future, and how these things might have evolved over your time abroad. Once we get into a busy pattern of life we find it difficult to reflect on things like our values, goals and relationships, not to mention the fundamental question of identity – who am I and who do I want to become?

There may seem to be a lot to work through and you may feel you are too busy to deal with it at the moment. However, if you make time to think through these issues, you will be better prepared to face re-entry stress and re-adjust more quickly, so it is well worth doing.

Try not to rush through the material. Give adequate time for personal reflection (and, ideally, discussion with friends) as you prepare yourself for the challenges and opportunities of returning home.

“It doesn’t seem possible that I’ve been back in Hong Kong for 2 months already. It has certainly felt strange coming ‘home’. I’d forgotten how busy life is here. For the first few days, I felt quite nervous trying to cross the road!”

**On returning to Hong Kong after studying in the UK**

## 2

# WHY ARE YOU RETURNING HOME?

Perhaps you are very excited to be going home or perhaps the thought of going home is frightening. This chapter aims to help you begin to think through that prospect.

**1.** Why are you returning home? Tick all those that apply:

- |                          |                                              |                          |                                     |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Visa has expired                             | <input type="checkbox"/> | Country or workplace needs me       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Finished my studies                          | <input type="checkbox"/> | Want to go home                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Family needs me                              | <input type="checkbox"/> | Relationship waiting for me         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Job waiting for me                           | <input type="checkbox"/> | Financial reasons necessitate       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Have an agreement with my company/government | <input type="checkbox"/> | Goal/s for coming overseas achieved |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Ready to go home                             | <input type="checkbox"/> | Other _____                         |

2. What are your main hopes and fears about returning home?

3. Would you prefer to stay in your host country? Why, or why not?

Reflect on the following responses to returning home:

### Having too optimistic a view of returning home

1. I should be able to cope easily because it is my own culture. I will not have any adjustment problems.
2. My relationships will be the same as when I left.
3. My life will be the same as it was when I left. The adjustment process should last no more than a few days/weeks.
4. People will appreciate the knowledge and experience I've gained while abroad.

"I was prepared for culture shock when I went abroad but I was not aware of how hard it would be to come back to Spain. The first weeks back home were great – seeing family and friends, enjoying food. But after a while, nobody was interested any more in my adventure, everything went back to a routine and I continued not feeling completely settled. My heart was divided into two now, and I realised that being away made me lose this sense of belonging just to one place."

**On returning to Spain after an Erasmus year in Edinburgh**

### Having too negative a view of returning home

1. I know I am not going to like it back home.
2. The change is going to be overwhelming; I will not be able to cope.
3. I will feel depressed, frustrated, disorganised and alone.
4. No one will understand me or my experience overseas.
5. Everyone will be jealous and suspicious of me.

### Some realistic expectations

1. I will go through a readjustment period, parts of which may be difficult.
2. People may respond to me differently, and I should not be surprised if a few are suspicious, jealous or threatened by me.
3. I can expect many things to remain the same, but I should be prepared to face changes in myself, my family, friends, workplace and the country as a whole.
4. Returning home may initially feel great, but I should be prepared for a conflict of values, confusion and misunderstandings, followed by growth and re-integration.
5. I will enjoy being reunited with family and friends but will also miss the friends I made in my host country.

"After returning home, I wished I could place Dublin and Amsterdam next to each other. Although it was great to be back, I missed friends in Dublin. Everyone at home was busy with their own lives, so it felt like starting again with all my social contacts. It was one of the most difficult times of my life."

**On returning to the Netherlands**



## TQs

If you're going home to take up a significant new responsibility in your family or at work, have you had a chance to discuss what people's expectations of you are? How can you clarify and respond to these expectations?

Are you seriously dating someone in your host country? How is that relationship going to affect your decision to return home? If the person is of another race, culture or religion, how will your family respond?

If you would prefer to stay in your host country and feel like you're only going home because you don't have a choice, there is a danger that you won't prepare well for returning home since you may be reluctant to think about it. This can make your transition all the harder. Make a list of the reasons you're going home and the positive aspects of being in your own country again. Resolve to work through this booklet to identify and grieve what you'll miss about life in your host country, acknowledge how the experience has shaped you and consider what you can bring back home with you.

"I didn't expect to make such close friendships during my exchange year. My friendships here seem so shallow now. I've been surprised by how lonely I feel now I'm home."

**On returning to Belgium after studying in Switzerland**

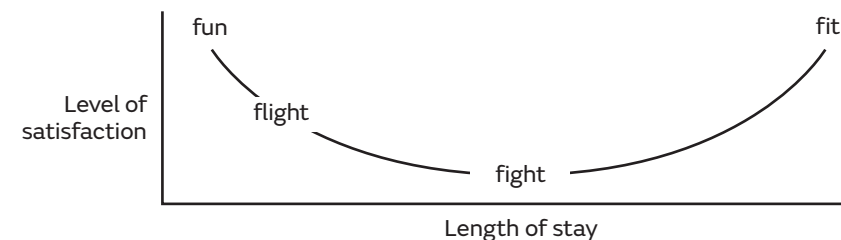
# 3

## THE REALITY OF RE-ENTRY STRESS

Just as you experienced 'culture shock' when you first came overseas, so you will also go through some form of 'reverse culture shock' when you return home.

Another frequently used term for this is "re-entry stress". The extent to which this will affect you depends on many factors, for example how similar your host country is to your home country, how integrated you were into local life, and how often you went home for visits, etc. But everyone will experience it to some extent.

The important thing to remember is that you are not the only one experiencing re-entry stress. It is a very common experience for those who have returned home after a period of time away. People in transition often go through the following stages:



End of  
Preview